

SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S OUTDOOR AND RISKY PLAY

Time, Space and Freedom

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HUMAN
EARLY LEARNING
PARTNERSHIP



Our work takes place on the traditional,
ancestral, unceded territory of the
sk̓wx̓wú7mesh (Squamish), sel̓ílwitulh
(Tsleil-Waututh) x̓^wməθk̓^wəy̓əm
(Musqueam) people



OUTSIDE PLAY LAB



About Us Toolkit Research News & Events Resources Books

Go Play Outside!

Children experience the world through play. Let them experience the world.

Our Lab

Our Research



Parent Tool



Designed for parents and caregivers, this tool helps individuals develop skills and confidence that enables outdoor play for children in their lives.

Get Started →

Educator Tool



Designed for Early Childhood Educators, this tool gives support on risky play, risk management, and guides development of a plan for changing practice.

Get Started →

Teacher Tool



Designed for elementary school teachers, this tool offer valuable insights and practical resources that can help move learning outdoors.

Get Started →

Overview

- Why is outdoor risky play so important?
- What does outdoor risky play look like for children today?
- How can we support outdoor risky play in our role(s)?



Photo: Megan Zeni



What role(s) do you *play*?



OUTDOOR PLAY

*‘A form of play that takes place outdoors, where the outdoors is defined as any **open-air, wild, natural, or human-made space**’*

- Outdoor Play Canada

Play is the engine of
optimal child
development



Play = Learning



What is risky play?



... thrilling & exciting forms of play involving uncertainty and the chance of physical injury



Play with height



Play with height



Play with height

Play with speed





Play with speed



Play with height & speed

Photo: Angela Roy



Play with tools



York House Nursery, UK

Play with tools



Play with tools

Play with elements





Play with elements



Hiding



Hiding



Rough & tumble play



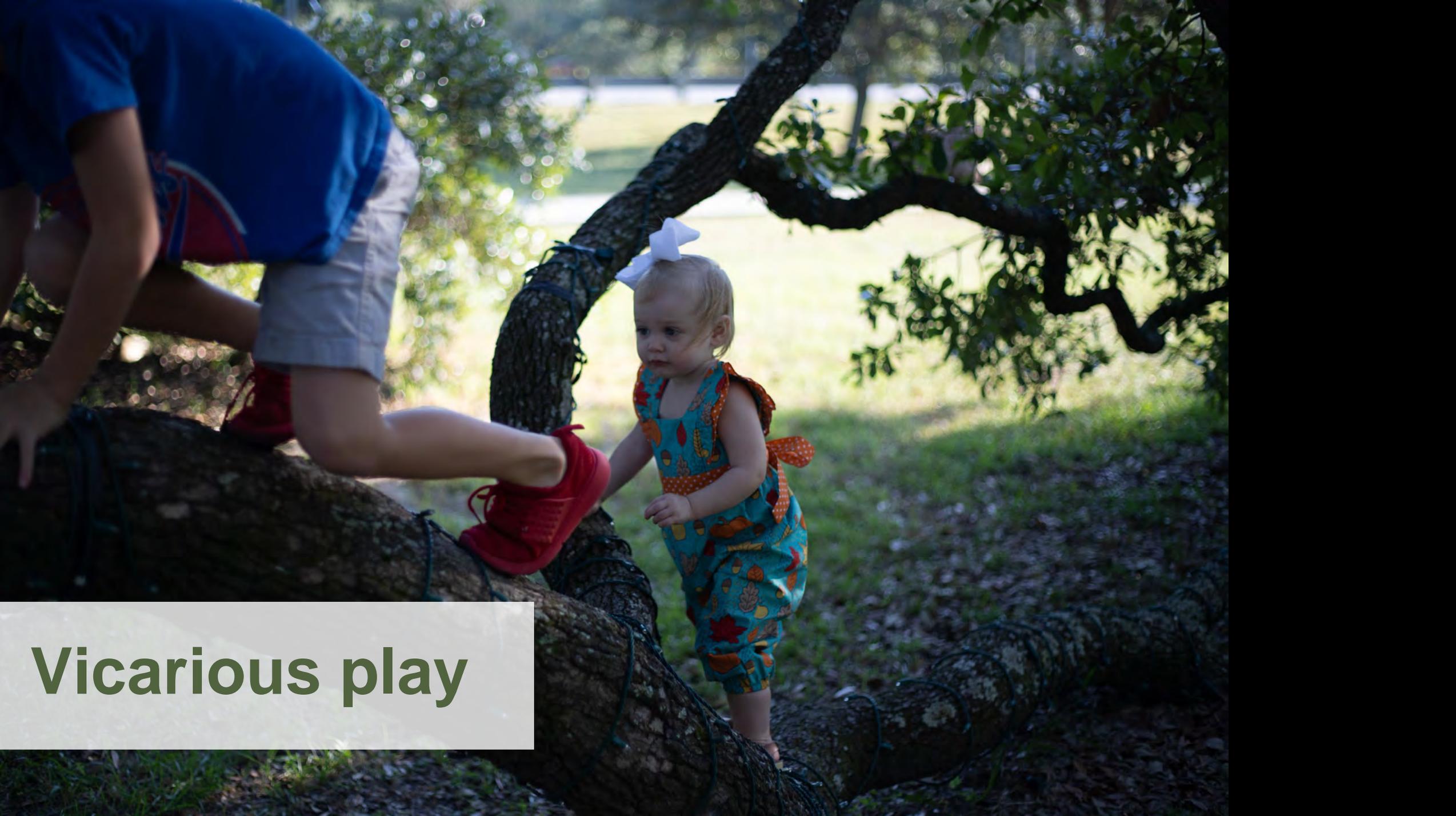
Play with impact



Play with impact

Play with impact





Vicarious play



Benefits of Risky Play

Risk Management Skills:
**Keeping kids safe means
letting them take risks**



A home for paediatricians. A voice for children and youth.

POSITION STATEMENT

Healthy childhood development through outdoor risky play: Navigating the balance with injury prevention

Posted: Jan 25, 2024

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Principal author(s)

Emilie Beaulieu MD MPH FRCPC, Suzanne Beno MD FRCPC; Canadian Paediatric Society, Injury Prevention Committee, [Injury Prevention Committee](#)

“Paediatricians are encouraged to think of risky play as one way to help prevent and manage common health problems such as obesity, anxiety, and behavioural issues.”

<https://cps.ca/en/documents/position/outdoor-risky-play>

Why Outdoor & Risky Play?

Child Development

- Social
- Emotional
- Physical
- Cognitive
- Creativity
- Risk management

Physical Health

- Physical activity
- Physical literacy
- Gut microbiomes
- Myopia

Mental Health

- Well-being
- Anxiety
- Resilience
- Self-confidence

Brussoni et al (2015) IJERPH 12(6)

Ramsden et al (In Preparation) Risky play systematic review

Children urged to play outdoors to cut risk of shortsightedness

Research reveals link between environmental factors and rising cases of myopia



Children need
3+ hours daily
outdoor time
Ian Morgan, Australian
National University

Nature, 519, 276-278

theguardian

© OUTSIDE PLAY LAB, 2026

What are some
other benefits of
outdoor risky play?

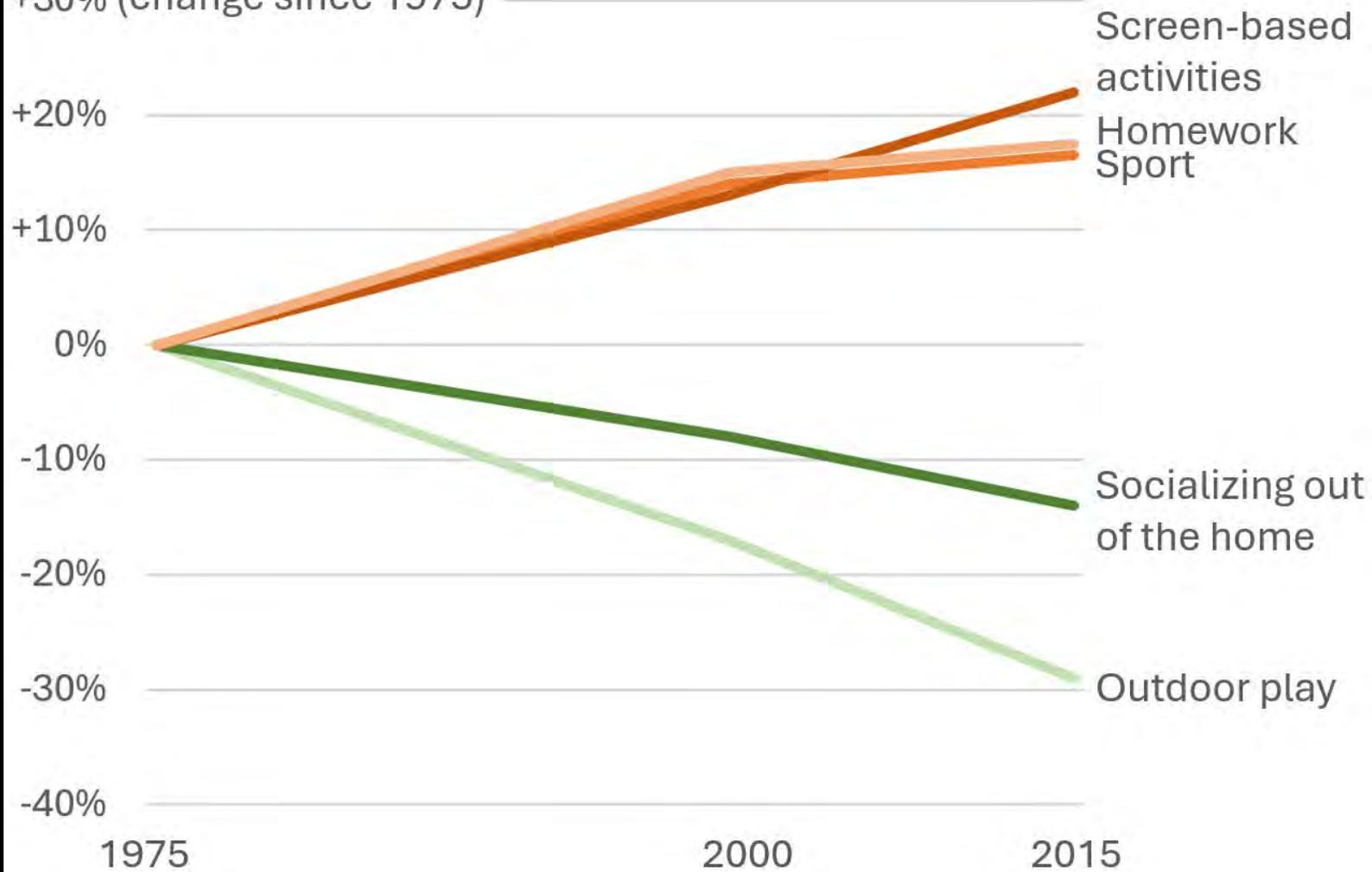


OUTDOOR AND RISKY PLAY TODAY



UK Children's Daily Time Use, 1975 - 2015

+30% (change since 1975)



Screen-based and supervised activities have increased since 1975...

...while unsupervised activities have decreased.

Whatever happened to playtime?



92% of children say they want more play in their lives.

for unscheduled forms of play.

- 92% of children say they want more play in their lives
- 93% of children say that play makes them feel happier
- 1 in 5 children say they are 'too busy' to play



Perhaps the most worrying indicator for the emerging crisis is the significant number of children who have little or no time for play in their lives.

- 10% of children say they have less than two hours of play per week
- 8% of children say they have no play in their lives



56% of children have less than one hour of outdoor play each day.

- 20% of children get less than one hour of free play per week
- 1 in 10 children get no outdoor play



Parents too are increasingly time-poor. Parents report that busy work-lives, the present distractions of technology, and stress are decreasing the time available for quality family play. It is hard to achieve a playful mind-set when thinking about work and distractions around the home. Many children also feel that play is not a priority for their parents.

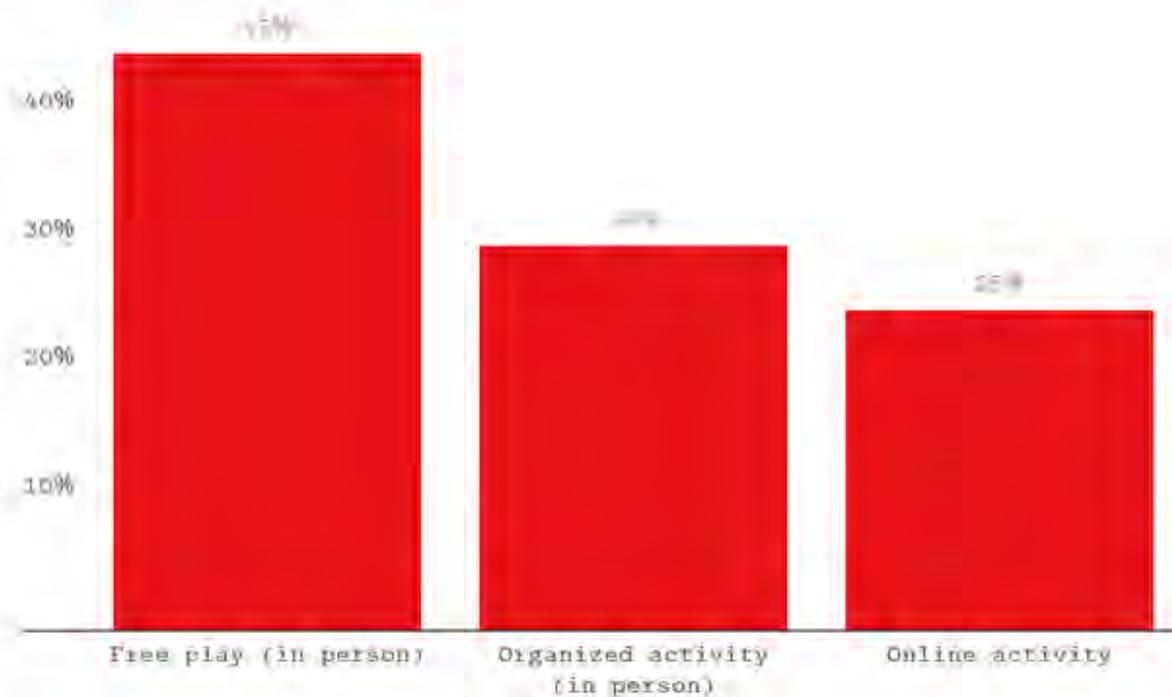
- 81% of children wish their parents would play with them more.
- 49% of children wish their parents would play with them more.
- 30% of children wish their parents would play with them more.



Both parents and children understand that play can help them develop vital soft skills and intelligences - and makes learning more effective and fun, whether it's inside or outside the classroom.

- 83% of children say they learn better when it feels like play
- 81% of parents believe play has a positive impact on the development of important pro-social skills such as empathy
- 49% of parents believe that children who play more will be more successful in higher education and at work later in life

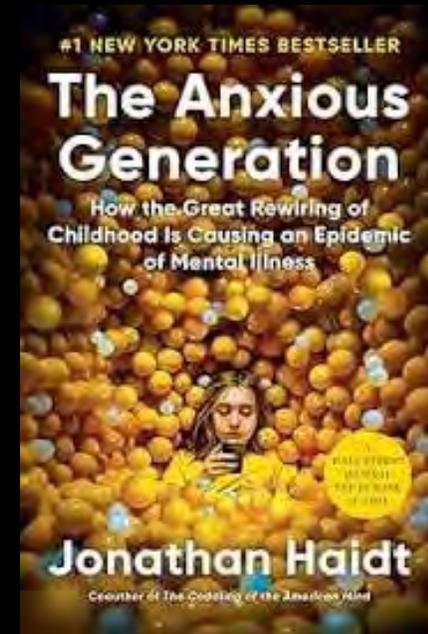
How would you rather spend time with friends?



Source: The Harris Poll



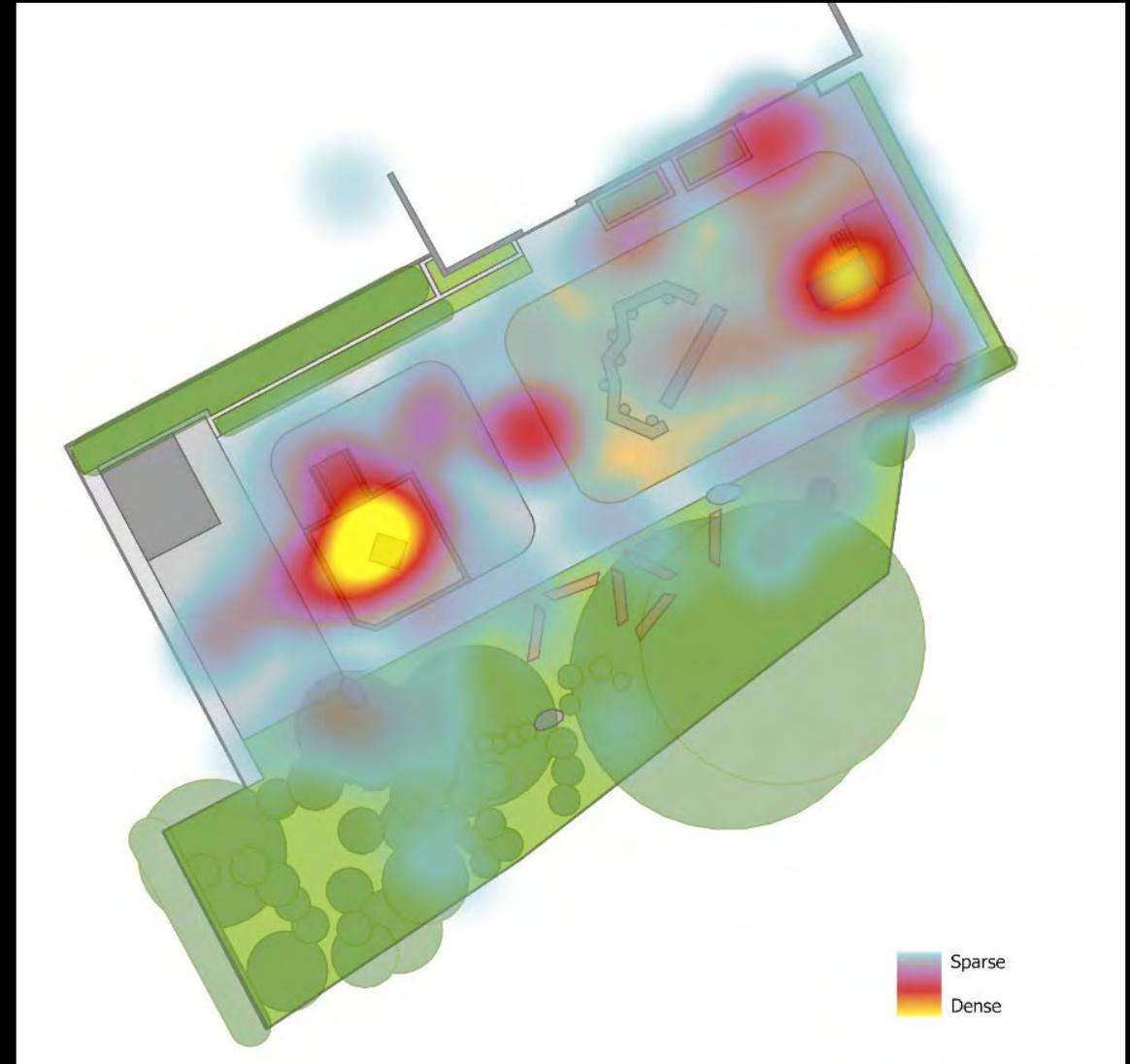
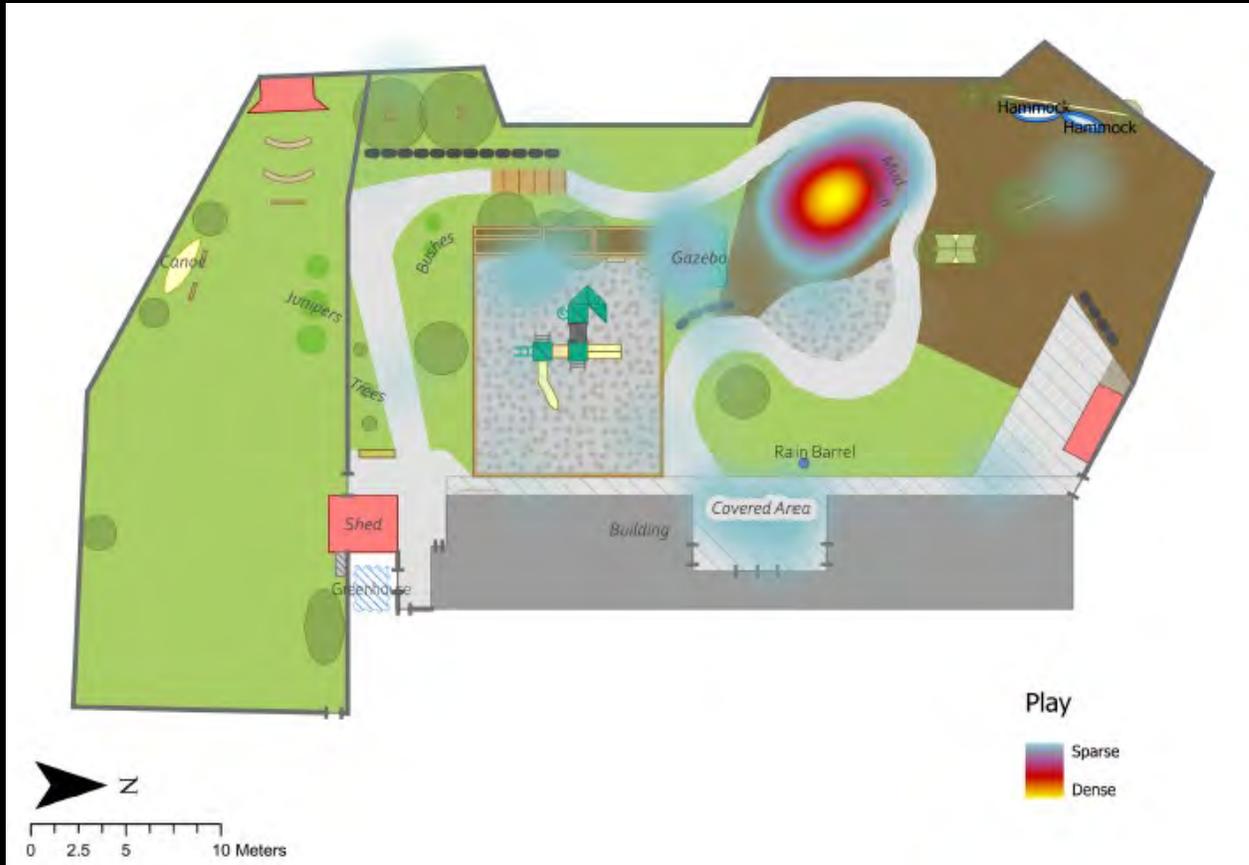
“Today’s kids want to spend their childhood in the real world. Let’s give it back to them.”

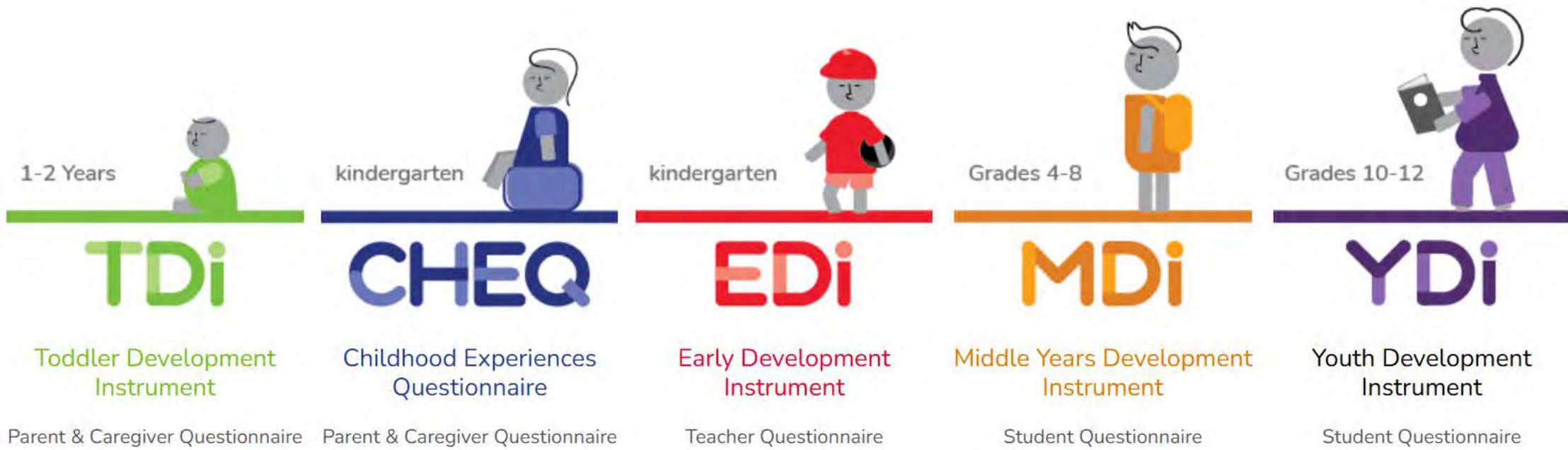


n=500 children in the US aged 8-12 years

Skenazy, Rausch & Haidt et al (2025). What kids told us about how to get them off their phones. *The Atlantic*

WHERE DO CHILDREN PLAY AT CHILD CARE?





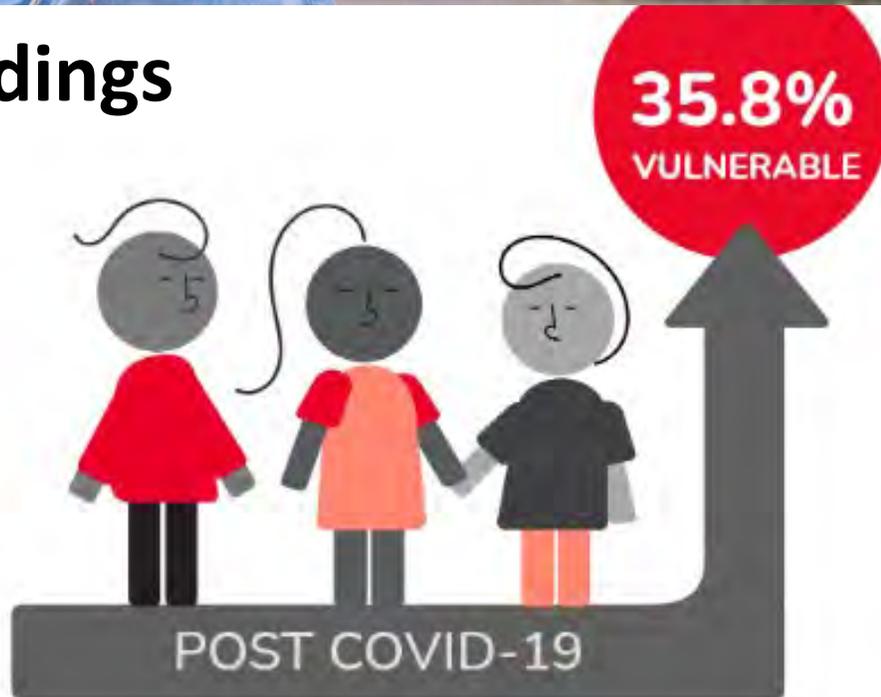
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Scales of the EDI	Description	Subscales
 Physical Health & Well-being	Children's gross and fine motor skills, physical independence and readiness for the school day.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gross & Fine Motor Skills • Physical Independence • Physical Readiness for the School Day
 Social Competence	Children's overall social competencies, capacity for respect and responsibility, approaches to learning, and readiness to explore new things.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall Social Competence • Approaches to Learning • Readiness to Explore New Things • Respect & Responsibility
 Emotional Maturity	Children's prosocial and helping behaviours, as well as hyperactivity and inattention, aggressive, anxious and fearful behaviours.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aggressive Behaviour • Anxious & Fearful Behaviour • Hyperactive & Inattentive Behaviour • Prosocial & Helping Behaviour
 Language & Cognitive Development	Children's basic and advanced literacy skills, numeracy skills, interest in math and reading, and memory.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic Literacy • Advanced Literacy • Basic Numeracy • Interest in Literacy, Numeracy & Memory
 Communication Skills & General Knowledge	Children's English language skills and general knowledge.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No Subscales



Key Findings



Report in the News



CBC NEWS

UBC study finds 36% of B.C. kindergarteners struggle in key areas of development



VANCOUVER SUN

Family financial stress contributing to B.C. kids struggling with developmental health, experts say



GLOBE AND MAIL

More than one-third of B.C. kindergarteners struggle in core areas of development, study finds



RADIO-CANADA CBC

More than a third of kindergarten students in BC are estimated to have developmental difficulties

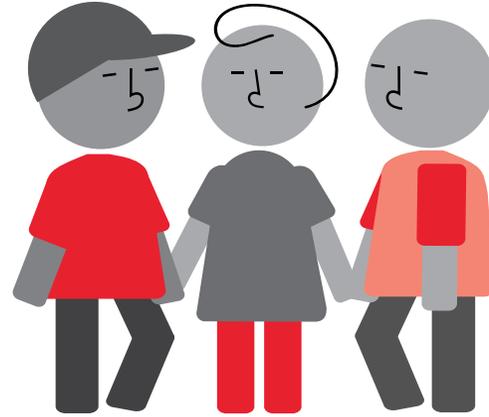
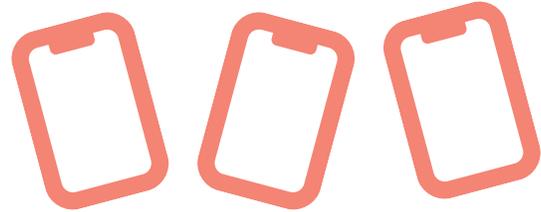


**Social & emotional development
highest areas of concern**

A Snapshot of Early Experiences in BC

Screen Time	Low (≤ 1 hour per day)	High (> 1 hour per day)
	46.4%	53.6%
Outdoor Play	High (6 to 7 days/ week)	Low (≤ 5 days/week)
	53.5%	46.5%
Chance for Risky Play	High (most days or every day)	Low (a few times a week or less)
	36.6%	63.4%

Screen Time



Children with high screen time (> 1 hour/day) were **59% more likely** to be *vulnerable* on at least one EDI scale compared to children with low screen time (≤ 1 hour per day) (**OR: 1.59**).

Children with high screen time had increased vulnerability on every EDI scale:

Physical Health:	+87% odds of vulnerability
Social Competence:	+50% odds of vulnerability
Emotional Maturity:	+57% odds of vulnerability
Language & Cognition:	+70% odds of vulnerability
Communication Skills & General Knowledge:	+52% odds of vulnerability

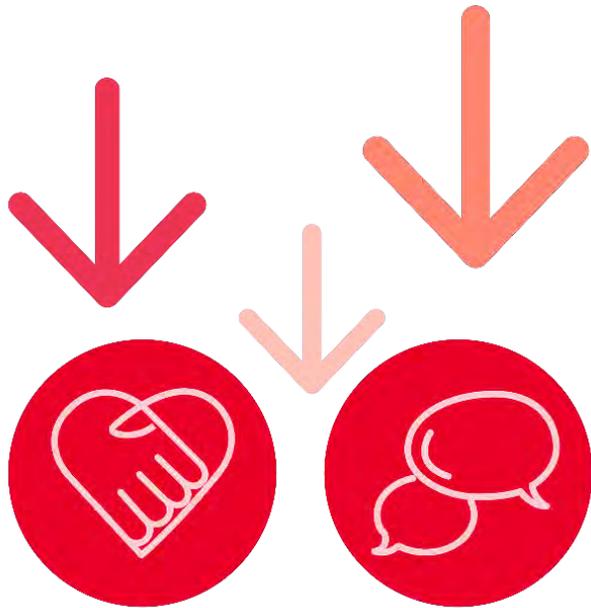
Outdoor Play: A Protective Factor **Against Vulnerability**

Children with high outdoor play time (6–7 days a week) were **26% less likely** to be vulnerable in *communication skills & general knowledge* compared to children with low outdoor play time (≤ 5 days/week).



Risky Play: A Protective Factor **Against Vulnerability**

Increased opportunities for risky play **significantly reduced overall vulnerability** (OR: 0.92).



Children with high chances for risky play (most days or every day) were:

18% less likely to be vulnerable in *social competence* compared to children with low chances for risky play (a few times a week or less).

35% less likely to be vulnerable in *communication skills & general knowledge* compared to children with low chances for risky play (a few times a week or less).

In the last wave of data from 2019–2022,



children showed vulnerability in one or more of these areas compared to

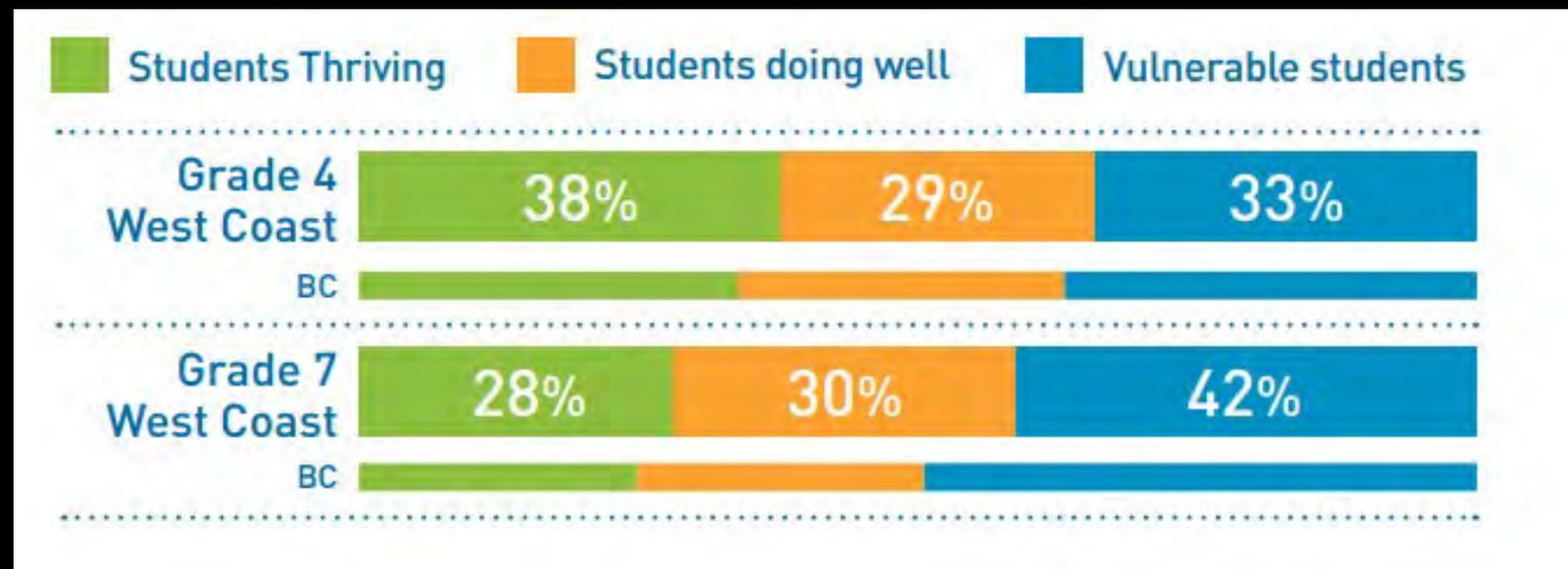


West Coast Neighbourhood EDI & MDI Data

Clayoquot Sound Biosphere
Region's Vital Signs Report / HELP
Data

EDI: 2019-2023

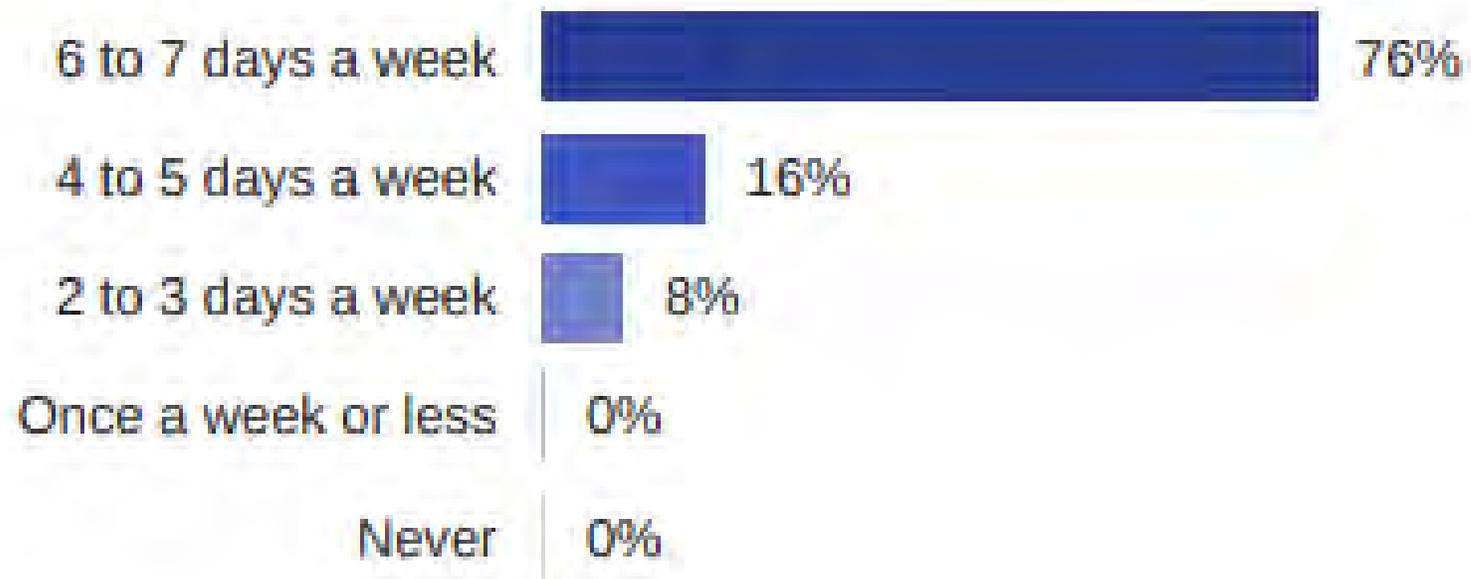
MDI: 2020 to 2023



School District 70 2022 CHEQ Data

Days per week the child played outdoors over the last 6 months

ANSWERED: 133



School District 70 2022 CHEQ Data

Frequency the child has had the chance to take risks while playing outside over the last 6 months

ANSWERED: 134



School District 70 2022 CHEQ Data

How much time per day the child used an electronic device in general:



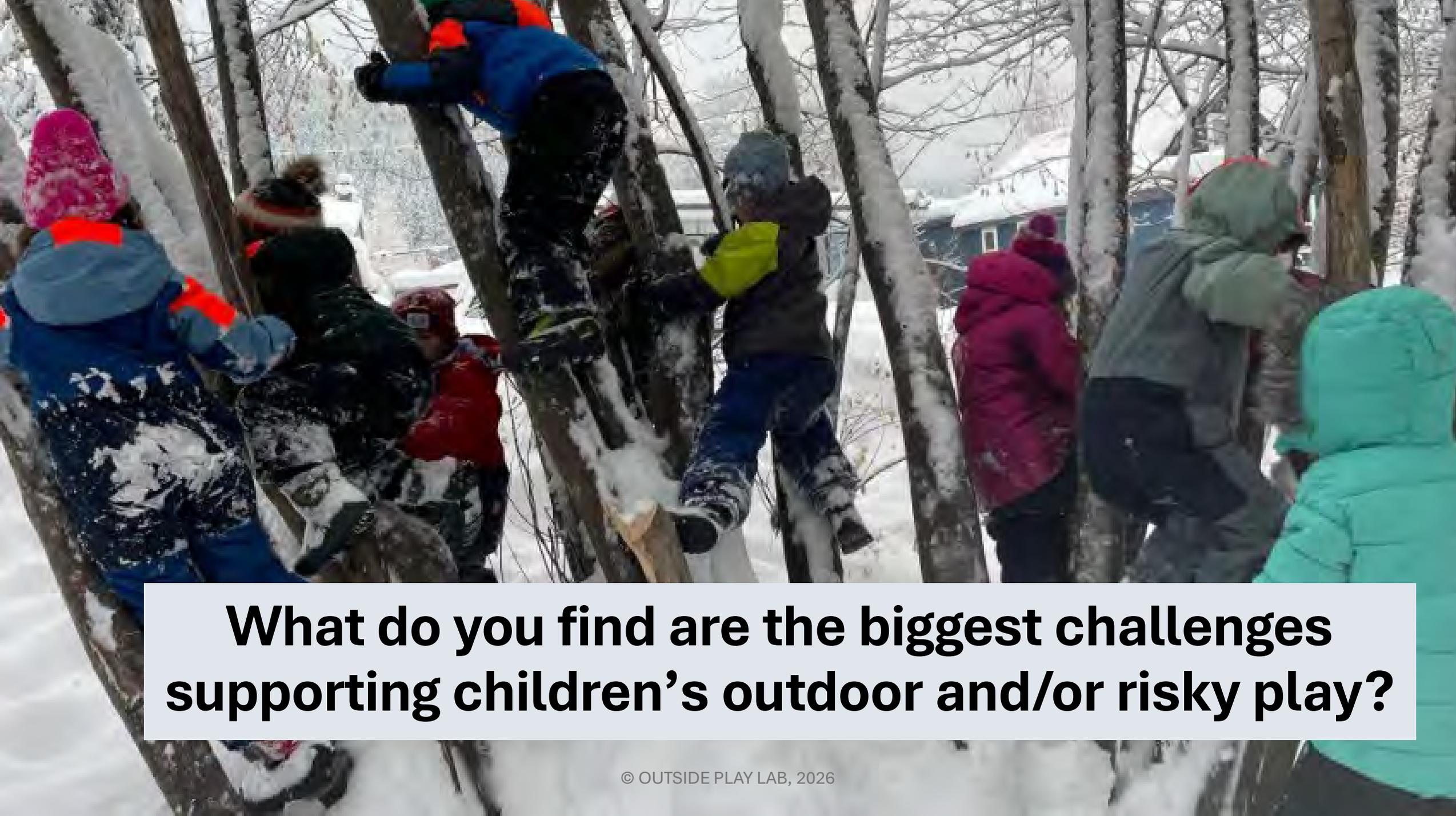
Freedom

Space

Time



The Yard, New York



What do you find are the biggest challenges supporting children's outdoor and/or risky play?



FREEDOM



What are we afraid of?

Child Abduction

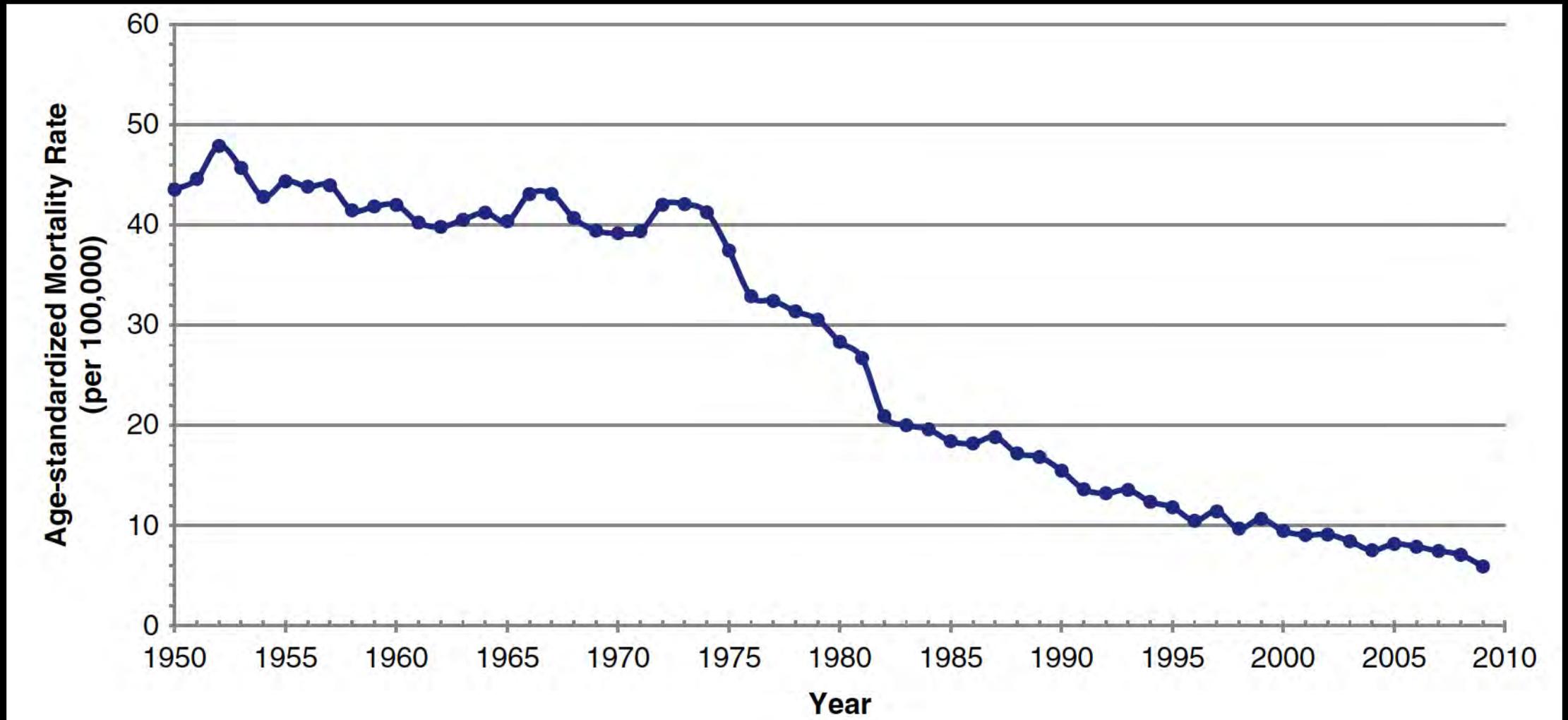
Risk of abduction by a stranger in Canada:
≈1:14,000,000

Dalley & Ruscoe, 2003

Leave child unattended for **200,000 years**

Warwick Cairns, 2011

Canadian mortality rates for all unintentional injuries, ages 0-19 years (1950-2009)



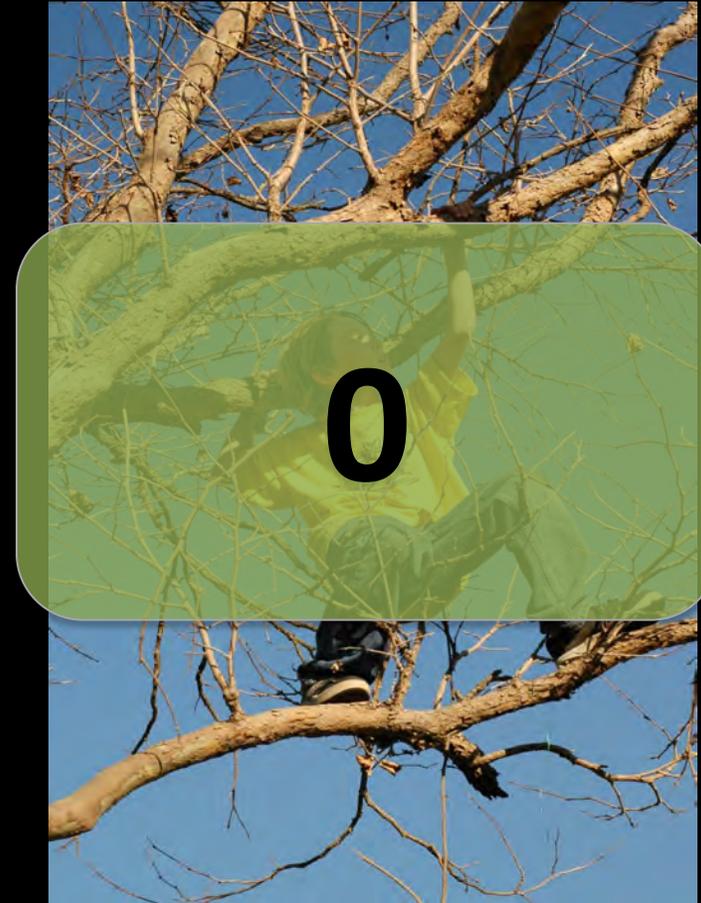
Outdoor Play-related Fall Injury Deaths, Canada, Ages 1-14

Fall from play equipment (2007-2022)



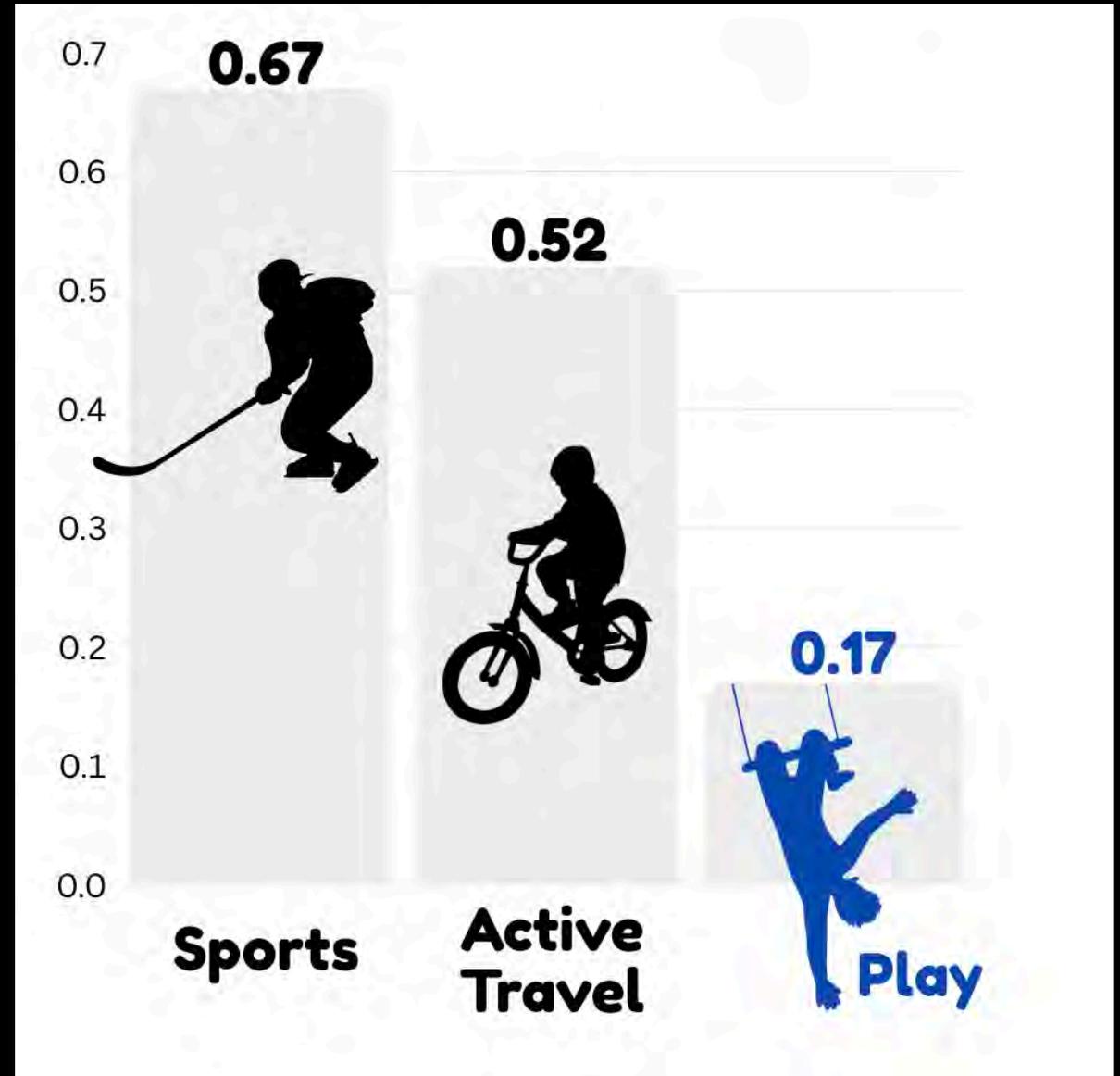
Hapa Collaborative

Fall from tree (2000-2022)



Medically treated injuries by exposure time

Per 1000 hours spent doing the activity (ages 6-12)



THE REALITY



- X No running
- X No climbing
- X No swinging
- X No use of equipment when wet
- X No bare feet
- X No 'hanging around'

17 second rule



**KEEP
CALM
AND
QUIET**

Our response to play



STOP yourself before you respond to, or stop children's play



LOOK & LISTEN to what is happening. What are the children doing?



THINK: are the children managing the risks? What might be the impact of adult involvement on children's play?



ACT: now you can respond in a thoughtful way, rather than by reflex



REFLECT: Was your action the correct one? What have you learned?

What to say instead of 'Be Careful'

Play with Harmful Tools

- Sticks need space. Look around you – do you have enough space to swing that big stick?
- Please keep one end of your stick on the ground!
- What's your plan with that big stick?
- Rocks need space!
- Before you throw that rock, what do you need to look for?
- That rock looks really heavy! Can you manage it?

Play with Great Heights

- Stay focused on what you're doing.
- What's your next move?
- Do you feel safe there?
- Take your time.
- Does that branch feel strong and stable?
- I'm here if you need me.

What to say instead of 'Be Careful'

Rough and Tumble Play

- Make eye contact before you tackle someone. Make sure they know you are coming so that they can get their body ready.
- Check in with each other. Make sure everyone is still having a good time.
- Ask them if they're ok.
- Ask them if they're still having fun.
- Did you like that? Make sure you tell them if you didn't like that.

Play with Great Speeds

- Please find a safe spot for your stick while you're running.
- I've noticed that this is a really busy area and I'm worried that someone not playing this game might get knocked over. Watch out for other people and give them lots of space.
- Should we move this game to a more open area?

Hazard



Risk



As safe as *necessary*, not as safe as possible

TIME





What about sport?



SPACE



As safe as possible

Risk = Danger



ADULT VS CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES

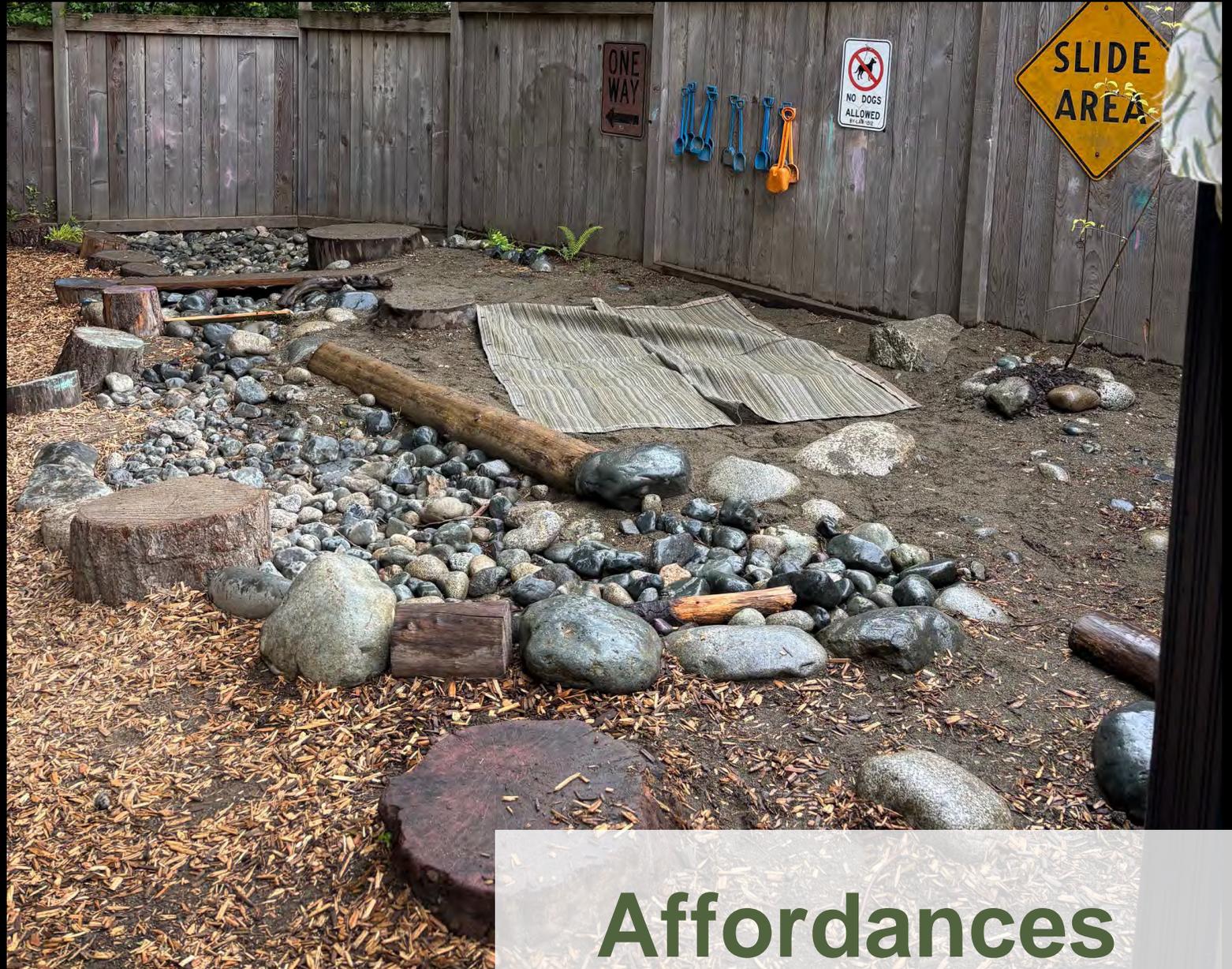


Every time something's over the fence then we ask them to bring it back over.

Because there's little holes in the fence then they can easily put it through.

A photograph of three children in winter clothing playing in a snowy forest. One child in the foreground is wearing a dark snow suit and a striped hat with a pom-pom, leaning forward. Another child in a dark suit and blue scarf stands nearby. A third child in a grey jacket is partially visible in the background. The ground is covered in snow and fallen leaves, with trees and branches in the background.

YES! spaces



Affordances



Affordances



Affordances



Equitable Access

Ensuring all children have daily access to high quality outdoor play in the places where they already spend their time



If we want our children to thrive in an unpredictable world, we need to let them play in unpredictable ways

In your role, do children have opportunities to...

- Climb stairs
- Climb a stump, play structure, or tree
- Hang from a low tree branch
- Walk over small boulders
- Use scissors to cut paper
- Try a butter knife or nylon kitchen knife on soft food items
- Hammer golf tees with a wooden mallet



In your role, do children have opportunities to...

- Play with water (water table, hose)
- Walk on icy terrain
- Learn about natural elements, such as fire, ice and water
- Set up an obstacle course
- Learn how to tumble
- Make a fort
- Find a new outdoor space to explore



What are some things you currently do in your role(s) to support children's outdoor risky play?



Photo: Annie Spratt



DEN-BUILDING

Resources

Go Play Outside!

Children experience the world through play. Let them experience the world.

[Our Lab](#)

[Our Research](#)



outsideplay.org/

Toolkit



Discover our tools aimed at helping parents, caregivers and educators gain the confidence and skills to support children's outdoor play.

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[Get Started →](#)

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Teacher Tool



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[Get Started →](#)

Outdoor Play Canada is a growing network of leaders and organizations working together to galvanize an outdoor play movement across Canada.

[LEARN MORE](#)

[THE OUTDOOR PLAY CANADA RESPONSE TO COVID-19: SEE DETAILS](#)



About Outdoor Play Canada

The history of outdoor play advocacy, practice and research in Canada is diverse and strong. Recently, there has been a marked increase in multi-sector efforts to align our work and build a movement together.

[LEARN MORE](#)



Position Statement

We conducted two systematic reviews to examine the best available scientific evidence on the net effect (i.e., balance of benefits vs. harms) of outdoor and risky active play.

[LEARN MORE](#)



Resources

Knowledge mobilization is an important part of increasing every child's access to outdoor play. Use these evidence-informed tools to support outdoor play in your community.

[LEARN MORE](#)



**RISK-BENEFIT ASSESSMENT FOR
OUTDOOR PLAY: A CANADIAN TOOLKIT**

Gill, Power & Brussoni (2019). Child & Nature Alliance of
Canada

outdoorplaycanada.ca/resources/

Loose Parts Play

A TOOLKIT BY THERESA CASEY & JULIET ROBERTSON



[inspiringscotland.org.uk/publication/
loose-parts-play-toolkit-2019-edition/](https://inspiringscotland.org.uk/publication/loose-parts-play-toolkit-2019-edition/)
or
outdoorplaycanada.ca/resources/



NEW RELEASE!

Pre-orders now available

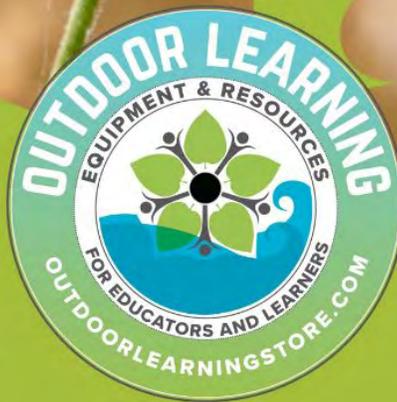
NEW!



Embracing Risky Play at School

Getting Kids Outdoors to Explore, Learn, and Grow

Megan Zeni & Mariana Brussoni



outdoorlearning.com

SUNNY



hat



sunglasses



1 layer



SPF 30
sunblock

CHILLY



1-2 layers



outer layer:
light jacket



pants: long
layer



shoes: warm

COLD



warm hat



2-3 layers



outer layer:
thick jacket



pants: long
layer



boots: warm,
waterproof

RAINY



appropriate
number of
layers



umbrella



outer layer:
waterproof
jacket



waterproof
boots

EXTREME COLD



warm hat



3+ layers, 1 insulating
(wool, fleece)



face mask



outer layer:
thick jacket



pants: long layer paired
with long, thick socks



boots: warm,
waterproof

Connect with us!

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rramsden@bcchr.ca
📷 PlayOutsideUBC

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